

Engaging Failing States

Chester A. Crocker

HITTING THE RIGHT TARGETS

TWO YEARS have passed since the September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes aroused the United States from its post-Cold War strategic slumber. The attacks spurred Washington to action and offered an opportunity for fresh thinking in foreign policy. To meet the challenge posed by large-scale terrorism of global reach, the Bush administration has mobilized the country, assembled substantial armed coalitions, overturned two hostile regimes, weakened the leading terrorist network, and adopted a posture of forward defense against future attacks. It has also refocused relations with Russia, China, and Europe to deal with terrorism and the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the hands of rogue regimes.

Despite these important achievements, there is something wrong with the big picture. The administration may be hitting its immediate targets, but it is only paying lip service to the broader objective of achieving a safer and better world order. Forcing U.S. global policies into the simplifying framework of a "war on terrorism" creates the illusion that there is one enemy. In reality, no global adversary exists analogous to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Terrorism is a tool, not an actor, and conflating the menace of terrorism with the threat posed by WMD in the hands of evil regimes further distorts the strategic picture. By concentrating on worst-case scenarios of immediate vulnerability, moreover, the Bush administration overlooks the failed-state crucible in which many threats to U.S. interests are forged and risks alienating the partners and undercutting the credibility required to address them.

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Now that the United States has carried out several bold military campaigns to unseat odious rulers, it must face the reality that these are only the first steps in building global security. Acknowledging this truth openly is the only way to mobilize U.S. and international attention, resources, and staying power. It is time, therefore, for a fresh articulation of Washington's purposes, centered on sustaining regional security, leading coalitions and institutions to help failing and threatened states, and winning the struggle after wars end and regimes change.

In some ways, the situation is ironic. There has never been a better moment to lead a determined United States toward sustained

engagement in the international system. In this sense, the attacks of September 11 were both a wake-up call and a golden opportunity to explain to the U.S. public why serious involvement with the outside world is necessary. And the Bush administration's National Security Strategy, released in September 2002, quietly but explicitly identified the importance of dealing with the problem of failed and failing states. American policymakers have been underestimating this challenge for years. State failure directly affects a broad range of U.S. interests, including the promotion of human rights, good governance, the rule of law, religious tolerance, environmental preservation, and opportunities for U.S. investors and exporters. It contributes to regional insecurity, weapons proliferation, narcotics trafficking, and terrorism. Yet since the strategy was sent to Congress a year ago, the administration has made helping failing and failed states a secondary priority.

The reasoning behind this lapse, presumably, is that rogues that seek to acquire WMD constitute a more pressing threat. But putting the problem of state failure on a back burner means that turbulence continues to spread throughout the Middle East, Africa, the Andean nations, South and Central Asia, and parts of Southeast Asia. Concentrating on rogues first and foremost could create the false sense that deeper problems are being resolved. Regime change may be more satisfying than long-term statecraft; it is certainly more telegenic. But unless the United States and its principal partners engage proactively to prevent and contain state failure, rogue regimes may seize power in additional failed or failing states, raising the specter of fresh adversaries that seek WMD and harbor terrorists. Moreover, the United States must learn to rebuild states after overturning their regimes, or the whole enterprise will backfire.

SLIP SLIDING AWAY

STATE FAILURE is a gradual process. Self-interested rulers might progressively corrupt the central organs of government (as in Burma or in Nigeria during Sani Abacha's regime). Corrupt elites might ally themselves with criminal networks to divide the spoils (as in Liberia and parts of the former Yugoslavia). State authority might be undermined and replaced in particular regions, paving the way for illegal trading operations (as in parts of Georgia and Colombia). During transitions away from

authoritarianism, state security services might lose their monopoly on the instruments of violence, leading to a downward spiral of lawlessness (as in several Central American states since the early 1990s). The complete collapse of state power in large sections of a country (as in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s and Congo for much of the past five years) is only the most extreme version of the phenomenon.

States with shallow domestic legitimacy tend to fail when they lose foreign support, as often happened in the former colonial domains of European empires. Failure is accelerated when the major actors in the international system abandon local regimes no longer deemed acceptable or convenient partners. Afghanistan exemplifies how an already war-torn polity failed after the strategic disengagement of Moscow and Washington in the early 1990s, ending up as a haven for terrorists. States may also fail due to regional contagion exported by rogues and warlords, as has occurred in central and west Africa.

State failure, inextricably linked with internal strife and humanitarian crisis, can spread from localized unrest to national collapse and then regional destabilization. And unattractive entities—some hostile to U.S. security interests, others hostile to Washington's humanitarian and political goals—may rise to fill the political vacuum. Invariably, state failure is accompanied by the victory of guns over normal politics, the rise of corrupt autocrats who thrive on conflict and deny freedom to their people.

It was fashionable for a period in the 1990s to speak of "democratic transitions," as though the final destination were a given. In reality, some countries will make it, some will remain stuck in failed and weak governance, some will become wards of the international system, some will descend into chaotic warlord struggles, and others will revert to authoritarianism. Which outcome emerges in a particular case will depend on many factors—not least on the action (or inaction) of the world's leading powers.

During the 1990s, when faith in globalization was at its peak, it was hoped that ten "big emerging markets" would change the face of global economics and politics and should therefore become the focal points of U.S. involvement. But however pivotal such states may be, the United States cannot confine itself to cherry-picking its way through the "best" of the transitional world while averting its gaze from the world's strategic slums. Much of the contemporary international state system is crumbling beneath the burdens of warfare, stagnant or declining

per capita growth, pandemic disease, rampant official corruption, and autocracy. Turkey may be a beacon of hope for the Muslim world, but it has few parallels. For every South Africa, there are dozens of struggling or failing entities such as Zambia and the Central African Republic. India may be heading in an exciting direction, but much of the rest of South and Central Asia is a mess.

Washington needs to look closely at the relationship between conflict, regime change, and state failure. According to a biennial report published by the University of Maryland's Center for International Development and Conflict Management, armed conflict has decreased by 50 percent since its peak in the mid-1980s and is now at the lowest level since the early 1960s. Still, at the end of 2002, there remained 25 countries engaged in ongoing or sporadic violence, the great majority due to civil strife over the control of government, people, or resources. The report identifies 33 societies emerging from recent wars and nearly 50 regimes located somewhere between autocracy and democracy.

New regimes—whether emerging from wars, negotiated transitions and first-ever elections, or foreign- or domestic-led regime change—tend to be fragile. They may require decades to become institutionalized states operating under the rule of law. In the meantime, the societies around them are ripe for exploitation by ambitious and greedy factions. Law and order, justice, accountability, public services, job creation, and investor confidence are all in short supply.

But the challenge is not only to address state failure in the handful of states where regimes get overthrown. It is also to stop and contain the process of failure before it produces worst-case scenarios. In much of the transitional world—those at-risk societies concentrated in Africa, the Middle East, and southwestern Asia—there is a footrace under way between legitimate governmental institutions and legal business enterprises, on the one hand, and criminal networks, often linked to warlords or political factions associated with security agencies, on the other. Frequently, the informal, undocumented economy is caught between these forces, struggling alongside embryonic civil society groups to survive and watching carefully to see which way the winds blow. When state failure sets in, the balance of power shifts ominously against ordinary civilians and in favor of armed entities operating outside the law (or with tacit official approval).

It might appear that globalization would favor those societal actors most closely linked to international networks of commerce, banking, communications, and diplomacy. But that is only true if the legitimate networks are at least as efficient and well organized as those linking corrupt elites, warlords, and mafiosi with the external facilitators who grease the wheels of criminal business enterprise. Those who lead the cells and networks that hollow out failing states focus with a laserlike intensity on exploiting opportunity and creating facts on the ground. Whether loosely arrayed in symbiotic relations or more closely coordinated by a central brain, they find space to operate in the vacuums left by a declining or transitional state—and they eat what they kill.

GETTING THE DIAGNOSIS RIGHT

IN THIS VAST ZONE of transition and turbulence, the greatest problem is not the absence of nations; it is the absence of states with the legitimacy and authority to manage their affairs. Most of these entities are recent creations, the result of European imperial expansion and subsequent withdrawal. As such, they have always derived a major, if not dominant, share of their legitimacy from the international system rather than from domestic society.

These states are in part a legacy of Washington's success in accelerating the breakup of European empires and championing the aspirations of formerly dependent or colonized peoples. Although Americans seldom acknowledge it, the United States has played a central role in driving the international system to expand from 51 sovereign states in 1945 to almost 200 today. How should this legacy be tackled, and what would a serious state-building strategy involve?

Much has been made of the Bush administration's initial disdain for "nation building," a term with unhelpful overtones from the 1960s. Nation building evokes efforts at economic development, political "modernization," and democratization. Although these are worthy and ultimately essential activities, they are not immediately responsive to the challenge posed by state failure.

Of course the United States should play a role in tackling global poverty. State failures (and associated conflicts) overwhelmingly occur in wretchedly poor countries, not in wealthy industrial or post-industrial

states. But, given the massive disparity in living standards within and among developing nations, economics alone does little to clarify policy implications: the answer to state failure cannot be reduced to growth and development.

Focusing on political modernization, meanwhile, has been touted as a way to approach the Muslim world. After all, the 56 members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (plus other countries with large Muslim populations) include a disproportionate number of the world's conflicted and troubled states. A civilization-based strategy, however, would obscure the issue. Islamic societies vary greatly, and many non-Islamic states are also at risk of failure.

Some identify autocracy as the core issue and suggest stepping up the drive for successful democratization as a bulwark against state failure. Still, there are many unknowns, such as how to sequence democratization's key elements, whether it produces stability at first, what its overall relationship to stability is, whether it can be implanted in all soils, and what outsiders can do to help it flourish. Strong democracies lock in political health, but evidence suggests that weak democracies—as well as reforming autocracies—are highly prone to state failure.

Others argue that failed states stem from arbitrarily defined national borders that bear little relation to regional history and ethnic divisions. The implication of such reasoning is that redesigning dysfunctional states should not be discouraged. This would mean allowing non-viable units to be subsumed into larger ones or to break apart through secession or partition.

But redrawing boundaries would inevitably open a Pandora's box. To legitimize secessionism is to invite claimants large and small from throughout the unsettled zones to put their cases forward, consider military options, and seek external backing. If the intended result was to create ethnically homogenous units, the process could produce thousands of nonviable statelets. And a new standard of greater tolerance for ethnically based territorial adjustments would be opposed by existing governments, which would rightly accuse the major powers of playing with matches.

Moreover, research by World Bank economist Paul Collier suggests that ethnic fragmentation is not itself the problem; conflict and state failure result from a particular type of ethnic imbalance between a dominant majority and a large minority. Contested natural resources

and separatist movements supported by well-heeled expatriate communities likewise contribute to state failure.

In specific cases where regional or ethnic factions of a failing state appear interested in working out a full-blown separation, or where partition appears to be the only answer to irreconcilable differences, outside actors may have a crucial role to play in orchestrating a legitimate, negotiated, and supervised separation. The emphasis in such marginal cases should be placed on how the process of change is brought about and who endorses the result. The international system should respect consensual separation, as it did in the former Czechoslovakia and with the 1993 Eritrean split from Ethiopia (even though this move did not solve the problem, and the sides were soon engulfed in a major war).

What about the option of standing back and letting stronger players take the law into their own hands by creating spheres of influence and protectorates or gobbling up weaker entities outright? There are some precedents, such as Morocco's takeover of the former Spanish Sahara in 1979, Indonesia's grab of East Timor in 1976, India's seizure of Goa in 1961, Russia's muscle-flexing in its "near abroad" during the 1990s, and today's regular interventions in Congo by various of its neighbors.

Perhaps the best thing to be said about such a policy is that it avoids involvement and postpones hard decisions. But the costs can be high when conflict returns in a different guise. And the price in terms of regional security and humanitarian losses can be horrendous: millions of people, for example, have perished in the west and central African wars of the past nine years. Equally important, intervention by local powers has not created stronger states in Russia's near abroad, nor in sub-Saharan Africa; rather, it has expanded the zone of state failures. It has become increasingly difficult to accept such passivity under the guise of realism.

Although the Bush administration appears ambitious about coercive regime change, it remains properly cautious on borders, as reflected in its adamant insistence on Iraq's territorial integrity. Comparable caution can be seen in the prudent stance of the UN Security Council's permanent members concerning the nettlesome Western Sahara problem: every conceivable effort has been made to find a formula that preserves some form of Moroccan sovereignty and does not produce yet another weak African statelet. Such prudence is likewise evident in the Security Council's handling of the Serbia-Kosovo entanglement, in the

joint African- and Western-led diplomacy on the Sudanese civil war, in the Norwegian-led (and U.S.-backed) mediation over Tamil separatist aspirations in Sri Lanka, in U.S.-endorsed talks being organized between the Philippine authorities and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, and in the mediation over autonomy and power-sharing in Indonesian Aceh, led by a nongovernmental organization.

In each of these cases, the focus is on how to strengthen the state politically and preserve its territorial integrity through measures that decentralize power, reform abusive policies, foster responsive politics, and check central-government domination. Fortunately, these are not insurmountable challenges. A wide range of organizations and governments already work to help failing states undertake such measures as power-sharing and wealth-sharing among units and regions, constitutional and electoral engineering to give voice to cultural and ethnic minorities, and community-based projects to foster intercommunal healing and religious reconciliation.

But weak states also need greater administrative and governing capabilities if they are to behave as responsible, sovereign actors, including enhanced legal codes and court systems; upgraded local and regional administrative apparatuses; responsive and well-trained police forces; stronger bank oversight and public financial management; and closer ties between isolated financial, security, and intelligence personnel at home and abroad. Solemn exhortations for states to behave as responsible, sovereign actors are not enough: the United States needs to help them acquire sovereign capacity.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

THE UNITED STATES and other leading powers need to plan and coordinate their strategies for dealing with failed states more coherently, fund key programs more generously, and speak more openly and directly about how to strengthen states and why it matters to do so. The most urgent task is to create the political and organizational capacity to swing into action effectively when existing state structures are failing or about to collapse. The concept of military readiness is well understood, but readiness for what happens after the fighting stops is just as important.

Washington does not have the capacity for political follow-through across a broad spectrum of postconflict or post-intervention requirements. As Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate, the U.S. government lacks the inter-agency mechanisms, institutional memory, doctrine, and committed personnel and budget resources necessary for rebuilding failed states and collapsed regimes. Senior executive branch officials have resisted attempts to bring coherence to postconflict reconstruction and state-building efforts. A recent bipartisan commission report sought to address this inexcusable situation and called on the president to designate a senior interagency leader for reconstruction tasks and to create dedicated staffs addressing the issue within the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and NATO. It also urged creation of a government-wide center for coordination and training in the major dimensions of postconflict policy (security, justice, governance, and economic recovery). These recommendations form the basis for the Winning the Peace Act of 2003 recently introduced in the Senate.

Washington's resistance to early action in failing states is rooted, quite naturally, in the fear of getting U.S. armed forces stuck with the varied tasks of state building. But rather than an excuse for lack of preparation and inaction, the need to limit the burden on the U.S. military should be seen as a reason to make postconflict planning both civilian led and multilateral. The group of eight highly industrialized countries (G-8) and other allies can provide the manpower to help get the job done, and UN institutions can provide expertise and legitimacy. Failed states have become sufficiently common that the leading nations must find a way to authorize and conduct *de facto* trusteeships.

Decisions on where to invest scarce time, energy, and resources should be based on such factors as the need to avert terrorist buildups and takeovers by WMD-inclined rogues, a country's inherent regional importance and weight, the possibility of regional side effects and contagion, and the potential humanitarian and political price of outright state collapse.

Once target states are selected, the major powers and institutions should focus their resources in four areas: defusing civil conflict, building state institutions, protecting the state from hostile external influences, and managing regional spread. At the June 2003 Evian summit, G-8 officials issued a joint declaration that pertains to the first three requirements. Titled "Fighting Corruption and Improving Transparency," the

document proposes a strengthened global effort against bribery, corruption, and financial crime and real transparency in reporting on revenues derived from extractive industries such as energy and mining. Such a measure is directly pertinent to governance in troubled societies such as Sudan, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, and Colombia. What is less clear is whether the G-8 governments will place a high priority on implementing its important provisions. Another initiative, the G-8 Africa Action Plan, outlines a wide range of capacity-building initiatives to support the adherence of African states to the good governance principles of the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

Major powers are beginning to take steps to ward off state failures in Africa and other turbulent regions. Because of the breadth of the problem, a sharper focus on specific countries and regions will be more meaningful than a generalized grab bag of programs. Leading governments need to speak loudly and clearly about just what these joint efforts will involve, connecting the dots between enlightened burden-sharing, the risks of state failure in troubled regions, and their own national interests and budgets. Above all, they need to hammer out joint strategies. When the United States and its allies work together to ward off state failure, it is possible to limit damage and achieve real progress—as in Sierra Leone, Sudan, Macedonia, and Sri Lanka; when they don't, state failure is aggravated—as in Serbia, Congo, Colombia, and Afghanistan before September 11.

Over the last two years, law enforcement and intelligence cooperation on terrorist financing have improved significantly. Interestingly, most of the agencies and regulatory frameworks brought to bear on terrorist financial networks had their origins in earlier campaigns against money laundering and financial crime. One example is the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Financial Action Task Force—grouping 29 member countries, two international organizations, and two observer nations—which operates by pooling information, naming and shaming (by means of its published list of non-cooperative countries and territories), and imposing financial sanctions.

In the end, the war on terrorism requires many of the same tools and techniques needed to battle the forces causing and thriving off of state failure. If the major powers and international bodies mobilized parallel efforts, perhaps hearkening back to expanded counterterrorist coopera-

tion, it would not take long to disrupt some of the deadly links among narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling, and the illicit trade in precious stones and metals, timber, people, and exotic species. The techniques of forensic accounting could be used to track down ill-gotten gains, helping respectable governments recover looted assets, deterring looters and those who collude with them, and bolstering legal action against transgressors. But to make such achievements possible, the necessary personnel, budgets, and political capital must be dedicated to the effort.

WALKING THE WALK, TALKING THE TALK

A MORE SUBSTANTIAL engagement by the United States and its primary partners is needed to address what is arguably the leading menace on the globe. This effort would begin by rebalancing the focus of public rhetoric in foreign policy toward broader and deeper engagement in state building and toward identifying the magnitude of the challenge posed by state failure. Properly packaged and articulated, a number of Bush administration initiatives—the Millennium Challenge Account, new assistance initiatives for Africa, expanded funding to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic, multilateral trade expansion, upgraded law enforcement and intelligence sharing on terrorist finances—could be part of a comprehensive failed-state strategy.

But it will be difficult to make full use of such instruments and to develop additional tools unless senior administration officials begin to explain what the United States is doing about state failure and why it matters. A broadly defined policy couched in terms of the full range of American interests and values has some chance of becoming sustainable. A narrowly defined foreign policy couched mainly in terms of military confrontation, rogues, and terrorists will not garner the breadth of domestic and international support required for sustainability.

The administration will also need to broaden its international political base and cease treating indispensable allies as little more than a nuisance. American leaders have a wide range of potential institutions and tools at their disposal for a long-term strategy to strengthen the capacities of sovereign states. Rather than serving as rhetorical dart boards for the amusement of domestic audiences, leading multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, the OECD, the G-8, and

the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe should be appreciated for what they might, if properly utilized, contribute to the effort.

Often the appropriate role for the globe's superpower will be to push negotiated settlements of intractable regional conflicts, which are often fed by state failure and spawn fresh failures as they burn. But the exact negotiating structure must be tailored to each case. The Quartet (consisting of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the UN) appears to offer some value in the context of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. A U.S.-led troika (with the United Kingdom and Norway), plus an African group led by the Kenyans, is dealing with the conflict in Sudan. And in the India-Pakistan case, the United States plays a unique role, supported by like-minded powers. U.S. engagement should be applied to citizens as well as governments. When there are ingredients for internally led regime change, as in Serbia, outside powers should facilitate the transition.

The Bush administration has succeeded recently in achieving a massive increase in funding for the Defense Department, reversing years of deferred investment. The time has arrived to boost the civilian foreign affairs budget as well. Since entering office, Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and their colleagues have begun to reverse the long-term budget decline in this area. Yet the international affairs budget remains around one percent of the total federal budget. Last December, eight of Rice's predecessors from both parties urged her to support a "substantial increase" in the 2004 international affairs budget so that it might ultimately be restored to its high-water mark of the Reagan years, when it was 30 percent higher than today. But whether the administration will expend the necessary effort to secure such an increase remains to be seen.

Any serious strategy to combat state failure will require more resources and attention than the problem is currently receiving. Polls have repeatedly shown that the public believes the United States spends vastly more on foreign assistance than it actually does and would support levels of aid and effort far higher than those actually in place. But only the president himself can demolish the misperceptions and make the case for doing what is necessary to engage the world's failing states. Unless he does, the administration's efforts to tackle terrorism and rogues and build a safer, better world will falter. 🌐

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